

Men in skirts and brutal rebellion in ancient Greece

Michael Scott

The fall of Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War (404 B.C.) marked the brutal dawn of a new world, which would culminate in the rise to power of the absolute monarch Alexander the Great in the late fourth century. One of the most dramatic moments in this long, bloody century was the Theban rebellion of 379 B.C. Here Michael Scott retells the story.

On a cold winter morning, a small group of men set out from the city of Athens, disguised in hunting clothes. They were watchful at every turn: hired assassins had been on the look out for them in the city for the past few months and had already killed one of their number. The group slowly and carefully made their way from Athens north towards the city of Thebes. They had one thought on their minds: rebellion.

This small band of brothers had taken refuge in Athens some months earlier when the bullying city of Sparta, fresh from its victories in the Peloponnesian War and bolstered by the Persian King's cash, had decided to take over the city of Thebes and establish a permanent garrison of its fearsome soldiers on the city's acropolis. Through careful planning and secret communication with sympathizers hidden within the Theban city walls, this group of men, themselves high profile targets, had managed to organize a counter-attack. The appointed day had come and now they set out to make their way to Thebes, slip in undetected, join with their supporters inside the city and take Thebes back from the Spartans. The rebellion was under way.

They had almost failed before they started – and without knowing it. The day before, one of the sympathizers within Thebes had lost his nerve and sent a rider post-haste with a message to the men in Athens not to come. But the rider, looking for his horse's bridle, found that his wife had lent it to her next-door neighbour. The messenger was furious but what could he do without raising suspicion – borrow someone else's, saying he had an urgent message to deliver to Athens? He decided the best thing to do was to sit tight and not deliver the message at all. The Theban rebellion was still on track – thanks to an unnamed woman who had decided to do her neighbour a favour.

The men slipped into Thebes and assembled in the house of one of the bravest sympathizers within the city. Slowly their other supporters came to join them. They disbanded their disguises and prepared to arm themselves: their targets were the four Spartan leaders in control of the city and then subsequently the might of the Spartan military garrison itself. The four leaders were at two different locations that night. Two were at a drinking party. Two were having dinner at home. The two at home would be the more difficult. Not only were they barricaded inside their homes with slaves and guards, but one of them was the most cunning of the bunch. He never drank and always kept his wits about him. He would be the most difficult kill.

But as the final plans were being laid, a knock came on the door of the house where the rebels were gathered. The men of the Theban rebellion froze. It was an armed guard sent by one of the Spartan leaders demanding that the man whose house it was come to answer questions about a possible plot. The man had no choice – he had to go. On the strength of his answers lay the future of the Theban rebellion, the rebels' lives, and the freedom of the city.

The man was lucky – the Spartan leaders who had summoned him were fairly drunk at the party and were easily convinced by his denial of the story. The man was helped by the rebellion's ultimate weapon – an insider. The Spartan leader's secretary was also a supporter of the rebellion and he now suggested the Spartans let this man go home unharmed. Returning home, the brave rebel who had offered his house and stood up to questioning was able to tell his comrades in arms that their mission was still a go.

The rebels split into two teams: one went to the drinking party, the other to take care of the two Spartan leaders holed up at

home. Both teams dressed as women to disguise their business. Hiding their swords under their skirts and their hair under long wigs they caroused down the street as drunken prostitutes, inching nearer to their prey.

But once again their mission was in jeopardy. They had been betrayed by someone in Athens who sent an urgent messenger with all the details of the plot to one of the Spartan leaders at the drinking party. The messenger put it directly into the hands of the Spartan. The secretary-turned-rebel-sympathizer could do nothing but watch. The messenger implored the Spartan to read his message immediately. The drunken Spartan smiled, looked at it, and slid it under his dining-couch pillow. 'Serious business tomorrow', he said and returned to his drinking. The rebellion was still on course.

The rebel men in skirts arrived and dashed into the party – at first they were taken for a new batch of dancers and prostitutes. But soon enough, as they threw off their wigs and removed their swords from under their skirts, their purpose became clear. The two Spartan leaders were slaughtered on the spot. The second team, however, had a more difficult task. Their skirt disguises got them near the house and up to the door. But from there they had to fight their way in hand-to-hand combat up the stairs. Several of their number were killed in the process but finally they captured both of the Spartan leaders and dug their daggers deep into their flesh.

News of the murders spread like wildfire across the city. The rebels broke into the city's weapons depot and handed out weapons to every able-bodied person who would fight for them. At dawn, they gathered in the city's assembly. Together, they turned to take on the full might of the Spartan garrison. The Spartan reputation had been dealt a fatal blow. The ancient Greek world would never be the same again.

Michael Scott is a Research Fellow at Darwin College, Cambridge. You can read more about the new world order of the fourth century in his new book, From democrats to kings.